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ABSTRACT

Sexism and racism in advertising have been well documented, but feminist research aimed at social change must go beyond existing content analyses to ask how advertising is created. Analysis of the "mirror assumption" (advertising reflects society) and the "gender assumption" (advertising speaks in a male voice to female consumers) reveals the fact that the advertising industry is a patriarchal institution which has capitalized on and reinforced women's position in the patriarchal order. Rather than mirroring society, ads exaggerate some parts of the picture while minimizing or even eliminating others. Rather than reflecting stereotypes which exist in society, ads actively promote them in order to sell more products. Once feminist researchers become aware that the "mirror assumption" is false, they can direct their energies to the implications of the "gender assumption" with its artificial social order of men as active authority figures and women as passive product users. (A list of 20 references is attached.) (MHC)

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MAKING SENSE OUT OF SEX STEREOTYPES IN ADVERTISING: A Feminist Analysis of Assumptions

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The 1970s saw an unprecedented scholarly effort to document sexism and racism in the media, particularly advertising. These content analyses, well summarized in Courtney and Whipple's 1982 book, *Sex Stereotyping in Advertising* documented the pervasive existence of demographic distortion and stereotypes in advertising. A number of studies, including the more recent Canadian Media Watch (Wiggins, 1985) compared results over time. It was assumed by many that, as women and Blacks achieved equal rights, media portrayals would become less distorted. Implicit in these studies are questions about the relationship between advertising and society.

--Are defenders of advertising correct in saying that advertising only *reflects* what is going on in society?
--Is it *reasonable* to expect advertising to simply reflect society?
--Does advertising itself effect changes in society?
--Does advertising create sex role stereotypes, or does it just use existing stereotypes?

These questions are crucial to a feminist research strategy aimed at social change. And they cannot be answered through content analyses alone. We need to pay more attention to how advertising is created. It will be useful to listen to what advertisers have said over the years about women and about stereotypes. The purpose of this paper is to begin to address these questions by surveying some key historical and analytical sources.

Assumptions About Advertising

This paper is organized around two companion assumptions commonly made about advertising: **The Mirror Assumption** (Advertising reflects society.) and **The Gender Assumption** (Advertising speaks in a male voice to female consumers.) These assumptions framed not only the origins of modern advertising, but also much of the 1970s discourse on sexism in advertising. Taken together, they lead to the problematic conclusion that the perspective of a dominant group reflects (or should reflect) the perspectives of society at large.

The Mirror Assumption

Advertising reflects society. If it doesn't, it should. At least that is what the Philadelphia advertising agency, N.W. Ayer and Son, stated in a pamphlet published in 1926. Roland Marchand begins his book, *Advertising the American Dream* (1985) with a quotation from this pamphlet.

> Historians of the future will not have to rely on the meagre collections of museums, will not have to pore over obscure documents and ancient prints, to reconstruct a faithful picture of 1926. Day by day a picture of our time is recorded completely and vividly in the advertising in American newspapers and magazines. Were all other sources of information on the life of today to fail, the advertising would reproduce for future times, as it does for our own, the action, color, variety, dignity and aspirations of the American Scene. (Ayer, 1926, quoted in Marchand 1985, p. xv)

Marchand used this as a hypothesis for his historical survey of print advertising during the Great Depression. He concluded that advertising does not act as a mirror--not even a distorting mirror--of American social realities. According to Marchand, some social realities were hardly represented at all. Images of maids, for instance, were used in advertising to symbolize wealth and upper class status. Although most American maids were actually Black or recent European immigrants, maids in advertising tended to look almost exactly like their wealthy patrons, with the single exception that they wore uniforms. (Marchand, pp. 201-205) Minority representation in advertising presents a strong challenge to the mirror assumption, since advertising images only rarely include minorities, even today.

Like earlier print advertising, television commercials have also failed to reflect some social realities and some population segments. (see, for example, Courtney and Whipple, 1974; McArthur and Resko, 1975; U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1977 and 1979). Nevertheless, despite significant and repeated documentation of demographic distortions and stereotypes, Stephen Fox named his 1984 history of advertising *The Mirror Makers: A History of American Advertising and Its Creators*. In the preface, Fox states his belief that "advertising has become a prime scapegoat for our times, a convenient, obvious target for critics who should be looking at the deeper cultural tendencies that only find reflection in the advertising mirror." (Fox, p. 8)

Stereotypes as Distorted Reflections Capable of Involving Viewers

But what does it mean when the mirror reflects and exaggerates some parts of the picture while minimizing or even eliminating others? Erving Goffmann describes this as "commercial realism." (Goffman, p. 15) Real life, according to Goffmann, is ritualized, but life in advertisements is hyper-ritualized, and it is edited to present a social ideal.

In *Advertising, the Uneasy Persuasion* (1984) Michael Schudson describes advertising as "capitalist realism," a take-off on "socialist realism," state sanctioned Soviet art. (Schudson, pp. 214-215). Although advertising is by no means state sanctioned, it does picture reality in a simplified and idealized manner. The ideals exemplified are

capitalist rather than socialist in nature. Characters are not fully developed and they do not represent specific persons but rather social types or demographic categories.

It seems to me that both Goffman and Schudson are talking about stereotypes: conventional and oversimplified images of types of people. Kathleen Jamieson and Karlyn Campbell have added, in *The Interplay of Influence*, that a stereotype may either idealize or demean the group it "types." According to Jamieson and Campbell, stereotypes are powerful in reinforcing societal attitudes about groups of people "because the process of stereotyping involves the reciever in creating the message." (Jamieson and Campbell, p. 148)

It is this aspect of *receiver involvement* that makes advertising stereotypes so powerful. Advertisements are meant to momentarily disrupt concentration but not the line of vision or flow of hearing. The advertiser has only a few seconds to make an impression, so stereotypes are used. Jane Root gives an example in *Pictures of Women: Sexuality*:

> For example, in order to make sense of images which juxtapose cigarettes with fresh mountain streams or dew drenched fruit we are pushed into the position of assuming that there is some connection between these things, which in reality, of course, there isn't. Cigarettes are not really 'as fresh as a mountain stream' or like a cup of coffee with cream. It is not possible for an ad to 'reflect' such connections because they just don't exist: instead, they are created by the advertisement at the split second that we look at the page in the magazines and find the image intelligible rather than totally nonsensical. (Root, p. 62)

According to Root, the ad is set up to engage the viewer into creating the association desired--to make meanings, and the meanings made are personalized meanings. This internalization process involves not only the processing of information but a constant re-construction of an internal self. Stuart Ewen reports in *Captains of Consciousness* that admen have made extensive use of the social psychology of Floyd Henry Allport, whose work suggested that the self-concept is socially constructed through interaction with others. The way you are with others, the way others expect you to be, and the way others tell you that you are, all contribute to the social construction of the self. Advertising continues to use this self-consciousness to create insecurities that may be calmed only through buying.

> A given ad asked not only that an individual buy its product, but that he experience a self-conscious perspective that he had previously been socially and psychically denied. By that perspective, he could ameliorate social and personal frustrations through access to the marketplace. (Ewen, p. 36)

Ewen provides evidence that self-consciousness has been skillfully cultivated by admen. This self-consciousness is particularly evident among women. According to Rosalind Coward, advertising encourages women to think of themselves as a series of *body parts* all of which are scrutinized, sanitized, embellished and eroticized (Root p. 66). Thus, in a sense, women actually become involved in objectifying and stereotyping their own cheekbones, underarms, hips, toenails, etc. An historical analysis of this phenomenon of "to-be-looked-at-ness" in patriarchy is beyond the scope of this paper. However, it is clear that, although the advertising industry should not be portrayed as the source of patriarchy, it must be recognized as a patriarchal institution which has capitalized on and reinforced women's position in the patriarchal order.

Stereotypes and the Origins of Consumerism

A prime example was Christine Frederick, ideologue of scientific home economy and advertising consultant. In *Selling Mrs. Consumer* (1929), Mrs. Frederick (sic) defined her concept of "progressive obsolescence," which required that advertising engender in women a willingness to discard possessions before they wear out. According to Frederick,

> *We have subscribed wholehaartedly to the revolutionizing consumer idea that goods should not be consumed up to the last ounce of their usability, but that in an industrial era Mrs. Consumer is happiest and best served if she consumes goods at the same approximate rate of change and improvement that science and art and machinery can make possible.* (Frederick, p. 250) (italics from the original)

Mrs. Frederick advised admen to enlist women's instincts in persuading them to consume. Her enthusiasm for consumerism was itself steeped in stereotypes. In a chapter on "Feminine Instincts and Buying Psychology," she proclaimed,

> In the order of their strength among women (according to my own estimate and experience) I list the following instincts:
>
> 1. Sex Love.
> 2. Mother Love.
> 3. Love of Homemaking.
> 4. Vanity and Love of Personal Adornment.
> 5. Love of Mutation, Style, Modernity, Prestige, Reputation.
> 6. Hospitality.
> 7. Sociability.
> 8. Curiosity.
> 9. Rivalry, Envy, Jealousy.
> 10. Pride, Ostentation and Display.
> 11. Exclusiveness, Social Ambition, Snobbery.
> 12. Tenderness, Sympathy and Pity.
> 13. Cleanliness, Sanitation, Purity.
> 14. Practicality, Economy, Thrift, Orderliness.

15. Love of Change and Novelty
16. Delight in Color, Smell, Neatness, Looks and Feel
17. Delight in Manners, Form, Etiquette
18. Love of Beauty. (Frederick, p. 45)

Not only did Frederick believe these attributes to be natural but she seems also to have applied them equally to all women. (It must have been a stereotypical home economist's love of precision that called for a ranked hierarchy.) Such quasi-scientific objectification of women is nothing other than stereotyping disguised as science.

Creating Stereotypes for Profit

Betty Friedan also found stereotyping disguised as science when she researched advertising archives for *The Feminine Mystique*. According to Friedan, after World War II, advertising "sold" consumerism to the public *through the manipulation of women's roles*. After the war, industry converted from the production of weapons to the production of appliances. Advertisers had to plan ways to sell appliances. To this end, she reported, marketing research had divided women into three categories: "The True Housewife Type," "The Career Woman," and "The Balanced Homemaker."

"The True Housewife Type," obsessed with housework and reluctant to do much outside the home, would buy the many appliances as long as she believed *she* was still needed. "The Career Woman" thought housework was a waste of time. She would buy some appliances, but she was just too critical to become a good consumer. "The Balanced Homemaker" had some outside interests or had once held a job. She readily accepted innovations without expecting the impossible. She thought of herself as the manager of a household and could be sold products associated with the idea of the science of housework.

According to Friedan, advertisers saw "The Balanced Homemaker" as the ideal type, with the most marketing possibilities. The moral, she argued, was explicit:

> Since the Balanced Homemaker represents the market with the greatest future potential, it would be to the advantage of the appliance manufacturer to make more and more women aware of the desirability of belonging to this group. Educate them through advertising that it is possible to have outside interests and become alert to wider intellectual influences (without becoming a Career Woman). The art of good homemaking should be the goal of every normal woman. (Friedan, 1963, p. 210)

There was a dilemma, though. If the products sold to "The Balanced Home maker"

should *actually* free her up enough to think about a career then sales would ultimately decline. So the trick was to sell products that increased the variety of pleasures she could offer her family. In other words, products should be effective enough to interest the creative homemaker without leading to any structural changes in her life. By adding to the "professional" status of homemaking as a career, and by appealing to women's creativity, Friedan argued the advertising industry played a significant role in coaxing so many women into the role of "The Balanced Homemaker."

Friedan's criticism challenged the mirror assumption. It is indeed a contradiction in terms to claim to simply mirror society while actively promoting stereotypes intended to mold society. The 1960s feminist revival led other women to challenge first the stereotypes, and then, the mirror assumption itself. Fox notes that in March 1963 a group of adwomen met with several hundred representatives of women's clubs in New York. *Advertising Age* reported that the adwomen spent the morning praising advertising, and the club women spent the afternoon complaining about it. Specifically,

> One questioner asked, "Why don't advertising women improve the image of women projected in ads?" The questioner was particularly incensed over commercials where "all intimate details of the toilet are exposed" and those showing "housewives deliberately fooling their husbands by serving them a prepared meal and making believe it was homemade." Margot Sherman's brief answer: "Such advertising was probably done by men." (*Advertising Age*, March. 18, 1963)

The adwoman implies that such offensive stereotypes would not be done by adwomen. Of course, whether these particular ads were produced by men or women is irrelevant. Advertising as an institution is, as we will see, assumed to speak in a *male* voice.

The Gender Assumption

This assumption, that advertising speaks in a male voice to female consumers, reflects a basic patriarchal organizing principle of the sexual division of labor. The ideal male stereotype is active, and the ideal female stereotype passive. In abstract communication terms, men speak and women listen. Men act and women appear. This principle operates not only within individual advertisements (in the form of stereotypes) but also in the social relations between admen and consumers. Roland Marchand intentionally uses the term "advertising man" to epitemize the profession. He points out that "*Who's Who in Advertising*, 1931, noted almost apologetically that it had included sketches of 126 women in a volume that gave profiles of 3,000 advertising men." (Marchand, p. 33) It is noteworthy that advertisers have for so

long refered to themselves as "admen." This has been true throughout the literature of advertising, beginning with *Printer's Ink* and continuing with *Advertising Age* and later the research journals.

Although advertising has a reputation as a male-dominated field women have not been excluded from advertising jobs. In *The Mirror Makers* Stephen Fox points out that "(w)omen had long if checkered traditions as workers in advertising. At any point in its history advertising included at least a few prominent female figures." (Fox, 1984, p. 284)

The quintessential successful adwoman was Mary Wells, co-founder of an agency in the 1960s. Known as an extraordinarily beautiful, capable, and competitive, even predatory, woman, Mary Wells surrounded herself with men. She had no complaints about men and ridiculed feminist allegations of sex discrimination.

> The idea about American men trying to keep women down in business is a bunch of hogwash. I've never been discriminated against in my life and I think the women who have experienced it would have anyway--no matter if they were men, or cows, or what have you. (Only) the nuts and the kooks are screaming like babies. (Fox, 1984, p. 295)

Wells was precisely the kind of woman who could acheive such stunning success in the male-dominated field of advertising in the 1960s: a combination of feminine appearance, masculine aggression, and personal identification with the male voice of advertising. Traditionally, however, decision-makers have been men, and the traditional perspective of advertising has been a male perspective which conceptualized consumer as woman.

Consumer as Woman

One of the most articulate promoters of consumer as woman was Christine Frederick. Again, in *Selling Mrs. Consumer* (1929), Frederick argued that

> Woman is of course powerful in buying largely because of her secondary position to man. She is not man's equal in earning and doing and building, therefore she gravitates toward the position of quartermaster rather than general in their mutual organization. She takes charge of supplies largely for the very reason that she can't lead the forces in the field. (p. 15)

She believed it was to the advantage of women to be the consumers, perhaps because it was the best they could hope for. She also seemed to argue that it was to the advantage of admen to appeal to the instincts of women. Women's instincts were supposedly better developed than those of men, so women would be *naturally* more responsive than men to the appeals they could engineer.

The Male Voice of Advertising

Not only does advertising historically represent an elite, male perspective on how to address and persuade the female masses, it also quite literally speaks in a *male voice* in the electronic media. A number of content analyses have documented the gender of voice-overs. Dominick and Rauch (1972) found that 87 percent of the voice-overs were male. Courtney and Whipple (1974) found 85 percent, while O'Donnell and O'Donnell (1978) found 93 percent. Again, in 1984, the Canadian Media Watch project reported 84 percent and 70 percent in two separate studies.

The male voice of advertising is also reinforced through the classic image of the male authority figure. For example, McArthur and Resko (1975) found that men were likely to be portrayed as authorities and women as product users. Another manifestation of authority is age. Older people communicate more authority than younger people, so it is not surprising that men in television commercials are significantly older than women. (Dominick and Rauch, 1972; Courtney and Whipple, 1974; Schneider and Schneider, 1979; Wiggins 1985)

Age, product authority status, and voice-overs are just three ways in which we can document the male voice of advertising. It is easy to see the pattern of male voice/female listener. It is a bit more difficult to recognize that such a hierarchical structure is *in itself* an artificially constructed social order.

The Expert/Advisee Hierarchy

The influence of experts on housework, for example, is the result of a home economics "crusade" in which Christine Frederick played a leading role. Frederick, according to the title page of *Selling Mrs. Consumer*, was "first to apply the principles of scientific management to home." She was household editor of *Ladies' Home Journal*, founded a home experiment station in Long Island, wrote a popular guide to scientific housekeeping and a home economics text, and promoted the "household revolution" through cooking schools, home demonstrations, industry promotions, etc. It apparently took a lot of promotion to sell the "expert/advisee" model of homemaking to American women. If American women naturally wanted experts to tell them how to be housewives, there would have been no need for such a promotional crusade.

American women did not constitute *themselves* as consumers in need of expert advise. Such hierarchical structures are generally designed and rationalized by

groups who situate themselves near the *top* of the structure. Early admen, for example, conceptualized consumers as unintelligent, lethargic, emotional, vulgar, culturally backward, and, (not coincidentally), female (Marchand, pp. 55-72). Marchand points out what an elite (and elitist) group the early admen were. They were generally white, wealthy, Protestant, urban, provincial, "non-ethnic" men who saw themselves as bringing civilization to the unwashed masses. Marchand uses phrases from a variety of top advertising men to summarize the elitist attitude toward women as readers.

> In a tone of scientific assurance, advertising leaders of the 1920s and 1930s (stated) that women possessed a "well authenticated greater emotionality" and a "natural inferiority complex." Since women were "certainly emotional," advertisements must be emotional. Since women were characterized by "inarticulate longings," advertisements should portray idealized visions rather than prosaic realities. Copy should be intimate and succinct, since "women will read anything which is broken into short paragraphs and personalized." (Marchand, p. 65)

The Circular Logic of a Universalized, Elite, Male Perspective

Carl Naether's 1928 book, *Advertising to Women* elaborated on such strategies. In the preface, he explains that the book is aimed at "the business man who wants thoroughly practical information on how to appeal to women, by means of letter, advertisement, or booklet, so that he may successfully influence them to take action--buying action." (Naether, 1928). Naether claims that women love to shop, and then provides strategies to make women want to shop. There is a circular logic in stating that women naturally love to shop, and then suggesting ways to make them want to do so.

Ewen points out the same problem in relation to advertising's assessment of the buying habits of European immigrants. He notes that advertisers considered their advertising "universal" in its appeal. Yet, when immigrants failed to respond, they developed special strategies to both sell and "civilize" the unsophisticated newcomers. (Ewen, p. 226). Likewise, Naether claims that women are more emotional decision makers than men, *and* suggests ways to manipulate women emotionally.

If women are naturally more emotional, there is no need for a special effort to develop an emotional response. If advertising appeals really are universal, then everyone, even immigrants, will respond without special "civilizing" messages. If women naturally love to shop, there is no need to persuade them that they want to shop. A circular logic is employed when such "natural" or universal phenomena must be artificially and painstakingly produced. Perhaps these phenomena are not

actually universal. Perhaps they just seem "obvious" to an elite/provincial group with access to the media. When they really are not true, that group does all it can to make them true.

Challenging the Epistemology of Advertising

This insistence that an elite/provincial (not coincidentally male) perspective is universally valid is advertising's version of objectivism. Epistemologically, it is the same principle that insists that grammatically the generic "he" and "man" also include woman. It is the same principle that allowed slave-owners to create the stereotype of the happy-go-lucky slave, whose carefree existence was made possible by his master's willingness to care for him.

Whenever an elite group succeeds in equating its world view with an objective *reality*, the world views of others are invalidated. This is what happens every time the Mirror Assumption is invoked in relation to advertising. Feminist researchers have done well to stop waiting for advertising to accurately reflect a variety of world views. Thus, letting go of the Mirror Assumption frees us to more fully study the implications of the Gender Assumption. And that, I believe, is the direction we want to go.

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